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ABSTRACT

This paper describes an incident between an academic researcher and a community member. The encounter, in which a researcher asked questions about farming practices, shows how cultural misunderstanding and failure to communicate the gains of research to the community has the potential to generate distorted information. The academic researcher has the responsibility to communicate in culturally sensitive ways, particularly when working with communities of which they are not members. An ideal methodology is one that would empower community members during the research process so that they began to gain self-understanding and, ideally, self-determination. (Author/SLD)

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Cultural Relevance in Research Methodology/Paradigm/ Terminology: Dilemma, Contradiction and Challenge.

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Abstract

This paper describes an incident between an academic researcher and a community member. It shows how cultural misunderstanding and failure to communicate the gains of research to the community has the potential of generating distorted information. Academic researcher has the responsibility to communicate in culturally sensitive ways particularly when working with communities that they are not members.

The Dilemma

A few years ago my mother had a visit with some two people I later came to learn were an academic researcher from Nairobi University and his young research assistant. When the two got into the compound, they found my young nephew playing outside the house and they asked him if Edith Wanjiru (my mother) was in, and whether they would talk to her. My nephew ran into the field where my mother was working and told her that she had "visitors" at home. She abandoned whatever she was doing and came home straight home to attend to the said visitors who were still standing outside the house. When she came closer, she could not recognize either of them … well dressed men with clipboards is not a familiar sight in the village. Her immediate instinct was to take off and hide, but on second thoughts she came and asked the two gentlemen, "I'm told you want to talk to Edith Wanjiru?" The younger of the two men, the only one who could speak our language, replied in the positive. My mother said to them that Edith Wanjiru was working in the coffee farm and she would go and call her for them. She disappeared in the coffee farm pretending that she was searching for someone while all this time she was contemplating on a wise move that would make these gentlemen leave without "interrogating" her. One thought was to overstay in the farm so that the gentlemen would leave. But then she realized that wouldn't work. She reluctantly came back and said that she couldn't find Edith Wanjiru but they could leave any message they had and she would deliver it as soon as Edith came home. The two gentlemen consulted in English (my mother does not speak English) and the young man who was obviously a translator said that they wanted Edith to answer a few questions about her small-scale mixed farming. They said to my mother that if she knew Edith well, she could then answer for her those questions. At this point, my mother was more curious than intimidated and "volunteered"

to answer the questions for "Edith Wanjiru". The "foreigner" read out the questions from what I would interpret to be a developed questionnaire, the young man translated the same to my mother, who answered in Gikuyu, and the answers were translated back to the foreigner as he wrote down. Some of the questions were as follows:

Researcher:	How many children do you have?
Edith:	(without a blink in the eye) six (lie no.1).
Researcher:	How big is your farm?
Edith:	3 acres (lie no.2).
Researcher:	What do you grow in your farm?
Edith:	Coffee, maize and beans (partial truth).
Researcher:	Do you have animals on your farm?
Edith:	Yes (truth).
Researcher:	Which animals do you keep?
Edith:	Chicken, goats and cows (truth).
Researcher:	Can you tell us how many of each animal you have?
Edith:	2 chickens (lie no.3), 2 goats (lie no.4) and 1 cow (truth).
Researcher:	Have you cow carved recently?
Edith:	Yes (truth).
Researcher:	Do you milk it?
Edith:	Yes (truth)
Researcher:	How many liters per day?
Edith:	About four liters (lie no.5).
Researcher:	Do you sell some of your milk?
Edith:	No (lie no.6).
Researcher:	What do you feed your cow?
Edith:	Hay, fodder and sometimes I let it graze in the field.
Researcher:	Do you buy manufactured cow feed?
Edith:	Oh.... No (lie no.7).
Researcher:	Why don't you?
Edith:	I can't afford it. (The questioning continues).

The Contradictions

I did not narrate this incident to show that my mother is a blatant liar; neither do I want to show that the knowledge that the academic researcher wanted to generate is not important. Rather, I want to raise some methodological issues that I find problematic in the approach taken by this academic researcher in a community whose members are not all literate and have not adopted English as their mode of communication in their day today activities. There is an obvious cultural insensitivity and the knowledge generated is far removed from the daily experiences of the community members. There is no communication that the knowledge generated will directly benefit individuals as well as the community. It is no wonder that my mother gives lie after lie without a care what it may mean to the academics, policy makers and interest groups all of whom she has no experiential knowledge of their existence.

A brief analysis of this encounter can reveal a few things that made my mother act the way she did. Her immediate appearance at the mention of "visitors" and abandoning her work is a cultural response. The Gikuyu people have a saying that "mugeni ni rui" which directly translated means that "a visitor is a river. A visitor is given the attributes of waters of a flowing river that do not settle at one point for any length of time. Visitors are therefore to be treated kindly and with respect because they are only here temporarily. This explains why my mother came home and abandoned her work to meet the visitors. On arrival however, she realizes that the "visitors" are unknown to her and she becomes suspicious for a number of reasons. One, my mother grew up in colonial Kenya and she was directly involved in the war of independence. We happen to come from the community that was in direct confrontation with the British because our land was forcibly taken and we were placed on reserves. Any form of resistance from us was harshly treated and often through interrogations and subsequent detention. My mother had witnessed my father being interrogated usually by smartly dressed "foreigners" who often carried pens and papers. Beside the interrogation during the war of independence, post-colonial Kenya has used the same methods to silence critics. One of my sisters had to

leave the country for exile in Sweden because of what the government interpreted to be subversive activities. When my sister secretly left the country, my entire family was put under surveillance and my home was ransacked as they searched for documents that would lead to the arrest of my sister or her husband. It is therefore obvious that a foreigner appearing in our homestead with the same characteristics of earlier interrogators would not be received kindly. She had to first shed her identity to be comfortable to lie that she has six children when in actual fact she has nine. On the same note, the Gikuyu people do not reveal the actual number of children for fear that a bad omen would befall on some. As it happened in the past, she worried that if she told the actual number of animals she had, some would be confiscated (the home guards/ collaborators often did that during the war) or she would be asked to pay higher taxes etc.

Secondly, the language barrier makes it difficult for my mother to express herself or even to understand and interpret the questions to her ability. She answers questions in monosyllables even though she would have expressed herself in deeper details if she had the language. The foreigner did not understand the body language that may have suggested that she may have not been telling the truth or even to show she was intimidated. She was obviously making some subversive body language as it happened when she was narrating this incident to my sister and me.

In conclusion, I can say that there was an obvious mistrust between the researcher and researched because of past experiences. There is cultural insensitivity by the researcher and the knowledge generation is not mutual. I find that the researcher has power and control, which he uses to intimidate the researched. How this knowledge was used is beyond my concern but I would say that the experiences it has left behind are negative to those who were involved.

The Challenge.

Going back to the community I was born and raised as an academic researcher will mean abandoning the "linear method of inquiry" (Ndunda, 1995, p.78) as described in the above incident with my mother and adopting an experiential methodology that will treat

the community members as knower in knowledge production through participation and dialogue, analysis of discourses/discussions (Fals-Borda & Rahman, 1991). I have to begin from where the community members are at the moment so that we can work together through the research process for social transformation. This commitment to an experiential methodology and the consequent transformation will be made possible by the fact that I'm an insider in this community and I would be allowed some information that only an insider can access. Beside the obvious trust the community members have of their own, there are details of non-verbal communication that only an insider would know. For instance, the Gikuyu people like many ethnic groups in Kenya particularly the elders' make extensive use of proverbs and other special forms of communication. Such forms of communication become even more complex when the problem is sensitive and the focus is on groups (Ahlberg, 1991; Ndunda, 1995). There is also the advantage of using Gikuyu as the language of research because "there are certain words that attain their full meanings, strength and flavor only if expressed in vernacular" (Ndunda, 1995, p.73). Body language such as gestures, facial expressions and voice variation are important tools of communication, which can only be understood well by people who have grown in this community (Ahlberg, 1991). Sometimes, laughter that may not be significant to an outsider could indicate subversiveness, disapproval or a cautionary warning to a particular phenomenon (Ahlberg, 1990: Ndunda, 1995).

An ideal methodology is one that would empower the community members during the research process. Empowerment means that those community members begin to gain "self understanding and ideally, self-determination" (Ndunda, 1995, p.44) through the research methods chosen. Those community members who have often accepted their struggles as a way of life need to start questioning the hegemonic institutions that has created and maintained their suffering which would consequently lead to a search for alternatives. This would mean consciousness raising through careful analysis of the historical and cultural structures that people can identify with.

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